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ABSTRACT

An historical overview of African and Afro-American music, from the foundations in sub-Saharan African music to the music of the 1980s, is presented in this paper as evidence that Afro-American music is closely intertwined with ethnic identification and follows the direction of Afro-American sociopolitical change. Slave and folk music, minstrel shows, the blues, jazz, rock, soul, and disco are among the musical forms discussed. It is argued that the combination of three main musical forms (folk, popular, and classical) has provided the foundation for all subsequent variations. Black music retains the polyrhythmic, polyphonic, improvisatory nature of its African foundation and was carried in the "ethnic baggage" that the African slaves brought to America. Although styles, and occasionally structure, have changed since slavery and continue to do so, the basics still apply, however subtly. African music is part of the "race memory" of Afro-Americans and presents itself in contemporary black American music whether or not blacks are aware of it. The history of Afro-American music parallels the history of African people in America. (KH)

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AFRO - AMERICAN MUSIC:

ONE FORM OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract

Beginning in Africa and continuing beyond the diaspora up to the present time, people of African descent have perpetuated their original ethnic identification through musical expression, among other art forms and sociological manifestations. Although there have been stylistic and cultural additions based upon exposure and, in some cases, submissiveness to the dominating American societal influences, this article attempts to show an ethnic thread coursing through even the music of the Eighties which identifies the Afro-American music of today (and the past) as containing the same elements of ethnicity found in African music, past and present.

While recognizing the need for further research and documentation, the author contends that this thread does exist, giving an overview of examples from the foundations of sub-Saharan African music and following the continuity throughout various eras of Afro-American music.

INTRODUCTION - BEFORE THE DIASPORA

There is an underlying, but traceable, musical thread coursing through all Afro-American music from early work songs to today's "rap music". This thread has as its basis the musical ingredients of its African roots coupled with the many influences brought about by the African's displacement in America. Some influences were included out of necessity or survival (e.g. Negro work songs, spirituals, blues, etc.), while other influences were purposely borrowed from European-American music and adapted accordingly (most notably classical music by black composers and some forms of jazz).

Throughout the history of African and Afro-American music we find similar rhythms, melodies, and often the same thematic material rearranged, re-worked and/or re-styled, but always maintaining that foundation which goes back hundreds of years to sub-Saharan Africa.

Although African music varies from one region to another, there are some features which are common ingredients in most sub-Saharan areas. The most outstanding aspect is the complex rhythmic structure. Much of the music tends to be polyrhythmic (containing several complementary rhythms within a selection) and, coupling this with another distinguishing characteristic of polyphony (combining several simultaneous voice parts) gives African music a distinct musical signature. It is even distinguishable from the similar polyrhythmic music of the Middle East and India, which is non-harmonic. African music, on the other hand

is almost invariably harmonic. Further, African music tends to use large scale gamuts more often than not leaving room for considerable improvisation, another common characteristic.

The suggestion of this article is, then, that these basic approaches to music were carried in the "ethnic baggage" of the displaced Africans and, although there have been many re-workings and re-stylings, the musical foundation remains the same throughout the history of Afro-American music up to the present day.

Basically, there were two types of African music: ceremonial and high life. The former was used for special celebrations and rites of passage and the latter for social occasions and parties. The most dominant African instruments were often of a percussive nature; that is, they were played by striking or plucking the instruments. Instruments like the kalimba (thumb piano), early forms of the banjo and xylophone, the oud (guitar-like instrument), various sizes and shapes of gourds filled with seeds, and, of course, a wide array of drums were used for social and celebratory occasions - birth, death, marriage, harvest, puberty, or just plain parties. In addition, there were several different types of horns and flutes combined with the human voice (often in choral performance and frequently "call and response") which, when added to the percussive instruments comprised the "orchestras" of our African ancestors. A spirit of communality permeated not only the musical performances

and celebrations, but almost every aspect of African life.

Over the hundreds of years the Africans were developing an advanced culture, their music was developing accordingly. Like almost all ethnic groups, the Africans used music (and other art forms) as a way of expressing their identity. (Dance was usually combined with music and, in fact, rarely were the two separated.) This identity was to be passed on to the generations which followed and, even under the yoke of slavery, Africans continued to develop music based upon the same beginnings which originated in the mother country.

SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS

After being forcibly displaced and restricted from practicing his native music, the African couched his concept of musical expression in forms more acceptable (i.e. less threatening) to the European-American slavers: work songs, spirituals and blues.....in English.

There are three basic types of early Afro-American music: folk, popular and classical. Folk is what Alain Locke called an "emotional creation" produced without musical training, which included work songs and spirituals. This music was usually reflective of the slaves' suffering and could be very somber and intense. Popular music seems to have been a reaction to the tragic strains of the folk idiom and brought back gaiety and light humor to the slaves' music; these included blues and minstrel music. Popular

music, incidentally, in diluted form, was the main force behind the development of an indigenous American popular music.

Classical music was derived from popular (just as popular derived from folk) and includes music by black classical composers as well as a school of jazz compositions. This is the most formal of all musical styles developed by the Afro-American in that it is usually notated and requires adherence to written arrangements (except where the written composition allows for improvisation).

The combination of these three types of Afro-American music (folk, popular and classical) is the foundation for all black music which has followed, all of which retains the polyrhythmic, polyphonic, improvisatory nature of the African foundation.

Each style of music had its' own raison d'etre. Work songs came with the territory. The slaves needed something - anything - to help uplift their spirits and distract themselves (if at all possible) from the arduous labor forced upon them. And, being a people with a rich musical heritage, they could certainly ad lib music and lyrics to coincide with the rhythm of work. On the other hand, spirituals served the two-fold purpose of spreading news about the Underground Railroad while praying to this new God the European had introduced them to. Songs like "Goin' Over Jordan" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" were really coded messages that Harriet Tubman would soon be arriving to lead

more slaves to freedom. The Africans didn't necessarily believe in this God the Europeans had forced upon them, especially in the beginning. But, to many of the African slaves these songs were an attempt to seek divine guidance just in case God was as powerful as the European led them to believe.

The blues, which formed the basis for many types of Afro-American music to follow and which still maintain their status in pure form to this day, were the natural response to the trials and tribulations of trying to survive in a hostile environment. Blues were and are a way of complaining while adding humor to soften the razored edge of the conditions being complained about. Blues have become standard repertoire for a significant number of black musicians and vocalists who see this style as ageless and historically meaningful.

As an aside, jazz grew out of a combination of all the styles listed above, especially blues, and is, in effect, the culmination of all the musical "ethnic baggage" brought from Africa and further developed in America. Classical by black composers has taken the structure of European classical music, but still manages to retain its' African heritage in terms of thematic material, rhythm, and black folk/popular music. Both will be discussed further on.

Just as the African used his indigenous music to express an ethnocultural identity, when his musical

heritage was outlawed in slavery he created new forms based upon his original African music to perpetuate the ethnomusical heritage, albeit rearranged to suit the circumstances.

RECONSTRUCTION AND ETHNIC ASSERTIVENESS

Even before the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and Congress's vote to end American slavery in 1865, black minstrelsy had originated on the slave plantations in the South. Almost every plantation had its own minstrel troupe, usually including singers, dancers, musicians and comedians. However, minstrelsy was never to reach the American stage in its purest form because the 1830's saw white actors in blackface begin to mimic this art form, which they continued for almost two decades. Ironically, when Afro-American minstrels finally took to the stage in the 1850's and 1860's (the first successful black company gaining notariety around 1865), they were forced to adhere to the performance pattern laid down by the white actors, even to the point of wearing blackface! Nevertheless, the black minstrels enhanced the shows with superior humor and enthusiasm which greatly added to the minstrel show's appeal.

So, minstrelsy was one of the first means used by Afro-Americans to become professional entertainers. It was during the Civil War and right after that minstrelsy reached its high point, and with the abolition of slavery

(at least in writing), many Afro-Americans struck out on their own. A significant number were former plantation performers who now traveled about entertaining more than just their own plantations.

These minstrel shows were a way of getting people to laugh at the comedy in Afro-American life, but were done rather tongue-in-cheek because the comedy never completely overshadowed the problems they all shared. They served merely as an opportunity to temporarily look at the lighter side of life. As with some other forms of Afro-American music and art, these minstrels were really using innuendo and, in essence, "putting one over" on the European-Americans. The black minstrels would slip in "digs" at the European-Americans whenever possible which were so carefully disguised and coded in black English that they invariably got away without repercussion. These shennanigans against the European-Americans also helped to assuage some of the animosity all displaced Africans felt towards their oppressors and thereby gave release to some of their negative feelings in a much less dangerous way than confronting the whites directly.

The concept of the black minstrel show incorporated the spirit of communality with music, dance and humor much the same way it was practiced in Africa. A single show might contain blues, spirituals and other derivatives which would become the different styles of popular music we hear today. The African connection was still there.

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RE-DEFINING OURSELVES MUSICALLY

1891 saw a change in minstrelsy. The rather informal approach gave way to enhanced stage settings and more elaborate costumes. (Here it seems, the Afro-American was, if even inadvertently, reclaiming the African tradition of elaborate regalia for performances.)*

On the one hand, so-called Negro Musical Comedy produced such notables as Eubie Blake, Cole & Johnson, Miller & Lyles, etc., while such people as W.C. Handy and Mamie Smith were major forces in the "jass" of that era which would become jazz in all its variations in the years to come. Simultaneously, spirituals and pure folk music were epitomized by a select few organizations such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Oddly enough, ragtime and jazz (father and son, musically) created an atmosphere where spirituals were to become more fully appreciated.

The commercial music market of "Tin Pan Alley" in New York City began to flourish alongside the ragtime music which was gaining popularity in the South and Midwest, mostly in dives & bordellos at that time. But, by 1898 ragtime had become a rage in America among black and white. As a result, ragtime was a major influence of the large majority of musical styles which would follow. Pianist/composer Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" (one of the first to be published in 1899) is a prime example of the synthesis which had occurred thus far. It contained the persistent syncopation reminiscent of the African penchant for rhythmic accent in its music.

*Minstrelsy was actually laying the foundation for what would become the "Broadway Musical".

In the early 1900's W.C. Handy began forming bands to play jazz, a synthesis of ragtime, folk and popular music and the predecessor to what we call jazz today. It was not uncommon for jazz musicians to arrange their own versions of operatic and classical compositions, in addition to composing original works culled directly from the roots of Afro-American music.

The beginnings of Afro-American music on Broadway were, in part, heralded in by James Reese Europe. Europe conducted an all-black orchestra in the 15th Regiment of the 367th U.S. Infantry during World War I and returned to work with the great black musical comedy team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. It is even said that Europe invented the Fox Trot.

Some say 1918 was the official birth year of jazz as we know it. The war was ending and Americans were in a celebratory mood. Social dancing, much of which was created by Afro-Americans (echoing the African tradition again), reached an all time high point in popularity. This dancing, though, was lively and ecstatic in contra-distinction to the formal dancing handed down from European shores. America responded to jazz and dancing with unabashed enthusiasm and the 1920's became the "Jazz Age". This era produced such greats as Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, Joe "King" Oliver and many more, all of whose bands proselytized the burgeoning of Afro-American music. There was little doubt that

this music - even though influenced by European exposure and being played more and more by white musicians - was of Afro-American origin. It had a distinctive racial intensity of mood and a unique, buoyant style of technical performance. Again, the elements of polyrhythms, polyphony and a general feeling of joie de vivre inherent in African music were quite evident.

THE FORTIES - PROGRESSIVE MUSIC STEPS IN

It was during the Forties that many aspects of Afro-American music were looked at carefully and added to by black musicians and composers. 1940 saw the publication of two great classical symphonies: William Grant Still's "Afro-American Symphony" and William Dawson's "Negro Folk Symphony", both of which bear out the African thread and the early Afro-American traditions in music; both symphonies contain folk music, blues, jazz, etc. It was also during the Forties that such renowned musicians as Charlie Parker, Coleman Hawkins, a young Miles Davis, and many more began to re-define jazz and bring tons of expertise to what some called "progressive jazz". It was during this time, too, that vocalists such as Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstein, Nat "King" Cole (also a pianist who began his career with a trio), and a host of others gave new interpretations to old songs while adding new ones to the repertoire. It was an era when black musicians were tapping all their creativity and energetically developing their ethnomusical identity.

Jazz during the Forties was laying the groundwork for

what American music in general was to become. Experiments with tonality, technique, structure, dissonance and other harmonic variations led to discoveries which are today commonly used for everything from commercials to the theatre.

The black classical composers were sufficiently impressed with some European classical music to meld some of its structure into what they were composing. The thematic material and style inherent in Afro-American music (minor key themes, for example) were, however, retained which made it difficult to classify it merely as classical music. Again, there was the polyphony, often improvisation (albeit notated), rhythms uncommon to European music, and overall, that distinct racial intensity of mood which formed the foundation of all African and Afro-American music.

THE FIFTIES - RUMBLINGS OF DISCONTENT

The Fifties were a bit more pensive for Afro-American musicians. They had observed what was happening to the great innovators; it was during the Fifties that Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and several other awesome telents fell at the hands of drugs, alcohol or combinations thereof. The emerging musicians of this era were back at the drawing board and they were deeply concerned. Not yet angry enough to do anything, but certainly concerned enough to begin thinking about alternatives to having their music co-opted as millions were being made from it by non-blacks.

On many levels, it didn't seem that way because the Afro-American music which was recorded, for the most part, tended to be "romantic". This was a time during which the "doo-wop" groups hit their peak - the Flamingos, the Dells, the Moonglows, the Ravens, and countless others. It was also a time when people like Johnny Mathis, Dinah Washington (who went from blues to romantic and a few places in between), Nancy Wilson (crossing over between popular and jazz), and others were played frequently on the radio. On the instrumental front, Jimmy Smith, Earl Grant, Ramsey Lewis and their colleagues were selling lots of albums and packing concerts.

The theme running through all the music during this era was love and romance or, at least, music dealing with non-threatening subject matter. Vocals like "I Only Have Eyes for You", "The Ten Commandments of Love","What a Difference a Day Makes", "Misty", "Unforgettable" and "A Certain Smile" were high on everybody's list. Instrumentally, tunes like "Kind of Blue", "Got My Mojo Working", "Hang on Sloopy" and the like were the ones everyone was whistling, young and old. It would seem, at first glance, that this was a bury-your-head-in-the-sand time when everyone wanted to forget about problems and escape into the wonderful world of love. Actually, though, and probably without even realizing it, it was a time of quiet-before-the-storm. Deep down, Afro-Americans were really singing about love so much because, possibly more than ever before, they realized that's what was

missing from the "land of the free". As we shall see, they were merely paving the way for the turbulent Sixties when they would let out all their anger and spit it at the "establishment".

The themes of love, romance and gaiety which permeated the Fifties, again, reminds one of the African community where most things were celebrated to musical accompaniment and where family, community and interinvolvement were common. Musically speaking, even the "doo-wops" and the instrumental romantic music were reminiscent of the African heritage in that they involved the same type of rhythmic progressions and intensity of feeling (often even the same chordal structure, too). The polyphony was still there, much evidenced by the "doo-wop" music while the orchestral music was prevalent in jazz. Again, we discover the basics which originated in the African heritage.

THE SIXTIES - BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Musically and sociopolitically, the Sixties were one of the most exciting eras in Afro-American music. They were also a time of upheaval, political change and profound sadness. This era witnessed the murders of Kennedy, King, Evers, Malcolm X and others. There was protest in the streets, depicted on television, radio and in the movies, and all the art forms (theatre, poetry, etc.) were rife with protest.

Even some non-blacks like Bob Dylan (admittedly influenced by southern black musicians) along with black

performers like Gil Scott Heron, Curtis Mayfield, John Coltrane, Nina Simone, and countless others flourished along with writers, poets and artists of all types as they all included protest in their endeavors. It was a time when Afro-Americans were extolling the positive values of being black and their art was bolder than ever before, openly challenging the society.

Musically, witness John Coltrane's instrumental, "Alabama" (an impressionist work reflective of the anger brought about by the goings-on in such places as Montgomery), Bob Dylan's "Oxford Town" (reminiscent of James Meredith's treatment by whites for integrating the University of Mississippi), Gil Scott Heron's criticisms of society like "Winter in America", as well as his protest song, "The Revolution Will Not be Televised", and Curtis Mayfield's "Darker Than Blue" (reminding blacks that they should become actively involved in "the struggle").

Because the Afro-American's political identity had changed to one of a new-found pride, anger and the willingness to openly protest, the music followed suit and reflected the times. The romantic music of the Fifties was still there in the background, but in the forefront of black music was the boldness and anger of a displaced people coming into their own. It was a time when "roots" were of paramount importance and the musicians reached deeply into the Afro-American and African heritages to create music that was reflective of both, while contemporary to that present day in terms of styling.

Afro-American music in the Sixties was chock full of variety. On the one hand we had avant garde pieces like Coltrane's "Om" (a musical seeking for spiritual guidance) contrasted with such compositions as Lou Donaldson's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (a grass roots piece calling on lots of blues overtones and syncopation). In all the Afro-American music the politics were the same, but the approach varied depending upon the individual artists' background.*

Africa was on the minds of many Afro-Americans during the Sixties; some even traveled to Africa to experience the homeland first-hand. Several Afro-American musicians spent time in Africa, eventually returning with not only the musical influences, but some of the instruments, too. Most music produced by Afro-Americans during this decade was very much influenced by African rhythms, polyphony, thematic material and improvisation.

The Seventies, however, slowly but surely turned things around in terms of thematic musical material and much of the overt African influence was overshadowed by an attempt to forge new musical, somewhat "American", frontiers. But, the underlying African influence couldn't be written off because the "ethnic baggage" was still being carried even without some Afro-Americans realizing it.

THE SEVENTIES - A REASSESSMENT OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

The early Seventies saw an almost half-hearted attempt to continue the "struggle" highlighted in the Sixties, but

*Although many of the compositions mentioned were recorded in the late Sixties, some were not released until the early Seventies.

probably because the Sixties didn't accomplish enough of what most Afro-Americans expected and felt they deserved, coupled with the assassination of several great leaders who seemed to offer hope, there was a gradual decline in the spirit of "struggle music". There were still many revolutionary musicians, writers, artists, poets, etc., but by 1975 it seemed clear that the Sixties revolution was over.

Musically, we saw the gradual and almost all-consuming interest in disco music; a very rhythmic and non-threatening type of music which encouraged release through dancing and which required little, if any, intellectualization; basically it was rhythmical and repetitive. Disco seems to have been a way of escape for many Afro-Americans, a significant number of whom had been able to acquire somewhat decent jobs (probably due to the Sixties protests) and merely wanted to relax and enjoy themselves. Disco became all-pervasive, gaining the support of Afro-Americans and European-Americans from teenagers to the middle-aged. It seems to have been a type of music whose timing was right, or it created a time for itself which seemed much-needed after "the struggle".

We must bear in mind that disco was nothing new in a musical sense. It contained the elements of African high life and Afro-American popular music in large amounts: repetition of the theme, call and response, lots of rhythm and encouragement to dance. In addition, disco synthesized elements of rhythm and blues, jazz, and romantic music from the Fifties, but now it had a "new beat".

While the "disco generation" was in full swing, it was joined by a kind of "light jazz" which used the same basic approach of structure and style, but which tended to significantly reduce or completely omit the improvisational aspects for which jazz was best known. These new approaches to jazz found former traditional jazz musicians playing watered down forms of jazz which was conducive to dancing and therefore could be adopted by the "disco generation".

Disco continues into the Eighties where it has been joined by another more obtuse, quasi-musical form of expression.

THE EIGHTIES AND BEYOND - A NEW WAVE

In the early Eighties, disco maintained its popularity, but was joined by "rap music" and its cohort "break dancing". This is one of the most interesting forms of contemporary musical expression and one which has a direct thread leading back to its African roots. Oddly enough, though, it is a phenomenon created and nurtured by the younger Afro-American generation, many of whom know little or nothing about African roots.

We can pre-date rap music back to the early work songs and chants created by the slaves - call and response, not necessarily melodic or harmonic, relying on percussion implied or actually supplied. We can carry rap music even further back to Africa for the same reasons, adding the obvious affinity that both rely heavily (and sometimes

only) on percussion as accompaniment. The interesting thing about rap music is, though, that it is a creation of mostly Afro-American youngsters (predominantly teenagers) who are many generations removed from their African roots, but who somehow innately respond to this method of music-making. Again, we encounter the "ethnic baggage" which is not so much a conscious awareness, but an integral part of the "race memory" which enables an ethnic group to respond emotionally and intellectually to something which is part of its heritage.

Rap music and break dancing were refined in the South Bronx of New York City, predominantly by black and Puerto Rican youth (bear in mind the African heritage of the Puerto Rican culture) who continue, even today, to nurture its development. "Rapping" and "Breaking", in addition to being a part of the "ethnic baggage" we speak of, seems to be a means for black and Hispanic young people to make their own statement and create their own individual identity within the overall framework of being Afro-American. Thus far, Rapping and Breaking seem to appeal for the most part to the younger crowd (and those who exploit for profit) and what may be a fad seems to have settled in for the time being.

The Eighties, though, are also seeing the comeback of the romantic music as well as a resurgence in the popularity of jazz. In the limelight these days are names such as: Wynton Marsalis, Lionel Richie, Deniece Williams, Miles Davis, DeBarge, and many more who are either playing jazz or singing romantic music. The other side of the coin

reveals many variations of rock and roll, rhythm and blues, new titles like new wave and punk rock (all influenced by Afro-American music), and other derivatives all of which echo back to Africa; the elements of rhythm, percussion, improvisation and polyphony are there for the seeking, and that "emotional creating" of which Alaim Locke spoke is the final and undisputed identifiable characteristic.

In terms of ethnic identification, the Eighties seem to be moving towards a generalized attempt to make Afro-American music more sophisticated on the one hand with jazz and romantic music taking the lead, while innovations such as rap and new wave are an attempt to express individual identities within the collective ethnic group. We see the romantic music and jazz as offsprings of popular and classical black music, while rap and variations of rock music result from folk music, updated with an Eighties beat, language and style.

SUMMARY

Throughout the history of Afro-American music there have been the constants of polyrhythm, polyphony, improvisation, and intensity of feeling. These aspects were the basis of sub-Saharan African music and were carried in the "ethnic baggage" of the displaced Africans in America. Although styles, and occasionally structure, have changed since slavery and continue to do so, the basics mentioned above still apply; sometimes quite subtle, but still there. It

seems that African music is part of the "race memory" of Afro-Americans and presents itself in contemporary black American music whether or not they are aware of it.

Afro-American music is totally interinvolved in ethnic identification (often referred to as "soul") and turns in whatever direction Afro-American politics turn. It seems that whatever the sociopolitical mood of Afro-Americans, the music follows suit and reflects the mood accordingly. The music often defines the people or, at least, helps them define themselves. To chart the history of Afro-American music is to follow the history of African people in America.